Based on twelve months of in-depth ethnographic research in Japan with retailers, customers, wholesalers, writers and craftspeople, Selling the Kimono is a journey behind the scenes of a struggle to adapt to difficult economic conditions and declining demand for the kimono.

The kimono is an iconic piece of clothing, instantly recognised as a symbol of traditional Japanese culture. Yet, little is known about the industry that makes and sells the kimono, in particular the crisis this industry is currently facing. Since the 1970s, kimono sales have dropped dramatically, craftspeople are struggling to find apprentices, and some retailers have closed up shop.

Illuminating recent academic investigations into the lived experience of economic crisis, this volume presents a story of an industry in crisis, and the narratives of hope, creativity and resilience that have emerged in response. The ethnographic depth and theoretical contribution to understanding the effects of economic crisis and the transformation of traditional culture will be of broad interest to students, academics and the general public.

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Ethnography is a celebrated, if contested, research methodology that offers unprecedented access to people's intimate lives, their often hidden social worlds and the meanings they attach to these. The intensity of ethnographic fieldwork often makes considerable personal and emotional demands on the researcher, while the final product is a vivid human document with personal resonance impossible to recreate by the application of any other social science methodology. This series aims to highlight the best, most innovative ethnographic work available from both new and established scholars.

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Selling the Kimono

An Ethnography of Crisis, Creativity and Hope

Julie Valk
This book is dedicated to my wonderful mother, Jennifer Griffith, for all her love and support.
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All photos, maps and diagrams are the work of the author unless otherwise stated.
The simplest way to address the question of where this idea for this book came from would be to say that it is based on my doctoral fieldwork, conducted over the course of twelve months in 2015 and 2016, and my thesis. But this book is, in fact, the product of a long process of reformulation of that original fieldwork. Above all else, this book is the result of long-lasting collaborative relationships with a wide range of retailers, designers, producers, wholesalers and customers in the Japanese kimono industry.

My first experience of wearing a kimono was in 2008. In my very early 20s at the time, I was studying Japanese at Nanzan University, and I was living with my host family in Toyota – the same family who would welcome me back to live with them during my doctoral research seven years later. My host mother, Sachiko, had welcomed countless foreign female students from Nanzan, and she dressed each one in a kimono. A lifelong tea ceremony practitioner and kimono aficionado, this was one of her favourite ways of having her guest experience Japanese culture. For me, however, this was a formative moment. Never had I experienced a form of dress so complex and time-consuming, and so different from what I was used to. It would be some years before I was to undertake serious research into the kimono, but that moment stayed with me.

I first stepped into a kimono shop in 2012, when I returned to Japan and worked in Kanazawa for two years. From my initial fascination with the kimono itself, I became curious about the industry. Who makes the kimono? Who sells the kimono? How well is the industry doing? Kimono retail appeared to be a world that was both part of Japan’s capitalist economy and, at the same time, one step removed from it, with its own conventions, structure and rules. It is a world largely unknown, especially outside of Japan, but even within the archipelago, where relatively few people get to see the inner workings of the industry. And it is an industry facing significant difficulties: deeply impacted by the economic crisis of the 1990s, it has been facing a steady decline in sales and revenue.
As this book explores in detail, by the late 20th century the formal kimono had become the standard form for Japan’s national dress. However, at the same time, demand for it was falling as Western clothing became more and more accepted for ceremonial and ritual occasions such as weddings, funerals and graduation ceremonies. As a result, the business model of the industry based on formal kimono was therefore less and less lucrative. And yet, what really struck me and ultimately motivated me to write this book was the resilience and creativity of those in the industry, and their capacity to hope in the face of crisis. My doctoral thesis focused, for the most part, on the transition from formal kimono to fashion kimono in the late 20th and early 21st century, exploring the socio-economic and cultural reasons for this shift: the 1990s economic crisis significantly impacted disposable incomes and spending practices, just as attitudes changed towards ritual life in Japan and the appropriate attire for ritual life. But in the two years following the completion of my thesis, and in my continued conversations with my research participants, I reflected more deeply on the mechanisms behind these changes, beyond their immediate socio-economic and cultural causes. It appeared to me that there was an apparently paradoxical relationship between economic crisis and hope, and that this complicated relationship has spurred the creativity with which a section of the kimono industry has reinvented its business model and carved out new markets.

Because crisis has the ability to force people to do things differently or look for new avenues to explore, for kimono makers and sellers, this has been expressed in new ways of making and selling the kimono. In doing so, the act of adapting to economic conditions has profound and transformative effects on the nature of traditional Japanese culture itself, potentially re-inventing the role of the kimono in Japanese society. Traditional culture, exemplified in artefacts such as the kimono, is often thought of as immutable or at least slow to change and evolve, but in fact this is not always the case. By situating traditional culture within the economic conditions of its production, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which traditional culture changes and evolves to adapt to periods of crisis, but also to broader socio-economic and cultural change.

This book is a testimony to the ways in which the negative forces of crisis, with all their destructive potential, can have a complex relationship with hope and creativity. Little did I know, however, as I began the process of writing this book in late 2019, that a new and different crisis was on the horizon. As I completed my first draft in early March 2020, the extent to which Covid-19 was going to affect our world was only just becoming apparent. Even now, as the book goes into production in March 2021, the world is only at the initial stages of assessing what the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will be. For the writing of this book, the crisis of Covid-19 certainly pushed the limits of my creativity and resourcefulness. A planned trip to Japan in April 2020 for a long-awaited reunion with research participants
to obtain updated data on their situation naturally was first postponed, then
cancelled altogether. I feared for the health and safety of my participants,
as they feared for mine. To collaborate on the completion of this book, we
improvised meetings online and over the phone, and in some cases through
letters. My participants reacted with the wonderful creativity and adaptability
that I witnessed them use in their businesses. They recounted the travails of
covid-19 through video, wrote pages of updates to their business via email,
and discussed details of the book over the phone. While my preference, and
theirs, I think, would have been to see each other in person, I have never
been so thankful for technology. This book, in its own modest way, is itself a
story of creativity in the face of crisis, or at least the ways in which difficulty
prompts creative problem-solving. I could see the same resilience, creativity
and hope that is the subject of this book in the way that my participants
responded to covid-19, but there is, at this stage, little doubt that covid-
19 will impact the Japanese economy, including the kimono industry, further
deepening the slump in sales. Some of my participants have stepped up their
online sales to cope with the absence of in-person customers, and in this way
weathered the worst of the crisis in the spring of 2020. For others, the finan-
cial blow has been more severe.

Covid-19, then, is a spectre that hangs over this book, much as it does
over our day-to-day lives at the beginning of 2021. As I recount the ways in
which the kimono industry has adapted to a past economic crisis, focusing
on narratives of creativity, hope and resilience, I am keenly aware of the
unfolding crisis and the effects that it will have on my participants. While
I have already been privy to some stories of how my participants approached
this crisis, and I allude to these stories in parts of this book, I have kept my
focus on how they survived the economic crisis of the 1990s and were con-
tinuing to adapt their business models to falling sales at the time of my field-
work. It is too early to gauge what the longer-term effects of the pandemic
on the kimono industry will be. I can only imagine that this new, challenging
crisis will bring about significant difficulties – but nonetheless I am hopeful.
As this book details, hope and crisis are old friends for the kimono industry,
and my academic hypothesis, as well as my own personal hope, is that the
same resilience, hope and creativity that I describe in this book will serve the
kimono industry as well in the challenges ahead.

And, perhaps, once the storm is weathered, kimono culture will be
transformed once again.
Acknowledgements

This book is the culmination of a six-year process in which, certainly, I was the researcher and the writer, but many hands and many voices have shaped the final result, and there are countless people whom I would like to thank for their time, input and generosity.

The first person I would like to acknowledge is my father, William Valk. My father never got to see my doctoral thesis on which this book is based, as he died in September 2014, not long before I was due to start my research. He gave me his blessing before he passed away, and I have carried it with me since. I used his camera and his voice recorder during my fieldwork, and with his blessing in my heart and the devices he owned in my hands, he was very much a part of my research.

I would also like to thank my mother, Jennifer Griffith, for her unfailing love and support throughout this project, and for being a truly outstanding proofreader. My mother was present during parts of my research in Japan and, having met some of my research participants, she is also very much a part of this project. My brother, Max Valk, came to Japan as well and met my research participants, and for his staunch support of my work I am also grateful. For my partner Nawar Noori’s love, support and willingness to read over my drafts I am also thankful.

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a kind word of encouragement at the ready and the best advice, I am also thankful to Dr Maria Şalaru.

I am deeply grateful to all my research participants for their willingness to share their lives and their stories with me, for allowing me into their homes and places of business, and for taking the time to give me a flavour of what it is like to make and sell the kimono in 21st century Japan. There are too many to name them all here, but I hope to have done justice to them all in this book. In particular, I would like to thank Sachiko for being a generous host during my year of fieldwork in Japan, and for the kindness and generosity she has shown me for over a decade. Kyoko and Takashi, also featured in this book, became wonderful friends to me during my fieldwork, and without them I would not have accessed a great many field sites and research participants; for their enthusiasm and their friendship I am deeply grateful. The Gotō family, appropriately featured at the start of this book, were the first kimono shop owners to speak to me about the industry, and were happy to do so even though I simply walked into their shop with no introduction: I owe them many thanks. I am very grateful, too, to the Shibakawa family for always making time for me during their busy working hours, and always letting me do some ‘deep hanging out’ at their shop, Azumaya (see Chapter 5). Also featured in this book are the Kanamaru family, the Yamada family, Kenichi Nakamura and Nakasaka-san whom I thank profusely for their generosity, time and kindness. I would also like to thank Professor Akira Gotō (no relation to the Gotō family) and the Anthropological Institute at Nanzan University for hosting me as a visiting scholar during my year of fieldwork.

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In this book, I have used the Hepburn romanisation system to render Japanese words into English. Japanese words which are not in common usage in English are in italics. As there is no plural form in Japanese words, all Japanese words are in the singular, even when there is more than one (for example, ‘there are many kimono’). Macrons are used to indicate long vowels.

With regard to names, it is an accepted convention in books written in English about Japanese people to adopt the Japanese convention of writing last name + first name. After some consideration, I have chosen to write Japanese names as first name + last name. This is due to several factors. Firstly, to ensure consistency when citing both Japanese and non-Japanese authors: both are always introduced as first name + last name, and thereafter by last name only, as is most widely accepted. Secondly, some of the people featured in this book are public figures, and they have themselves chosen to render their names publicly as first name + last name, so for consistency purposes I have kept this convention throughout the book. Once introduced, most of the people in this book are referred to as last name + san, as would be typical in Japanese, but there are some exceptions, which I have made efforts to point out and explain when they appear. The result is, I hope, not too confusing. As anthropologists are quick to note, systems of language and naming conventions are patterned onto our wonderfully complex modes of interaction, and I have attempted to be as faithful to the ethnographic reality of my research as possible – inconsistencies and all.
A note on website links and currency conversions

All website links functioned correctly at the time of publication.
Currency conversions are provided for the sole purpose of giving the reader a sense of monetary value. Conversions from Japanese yen to British pounds are estimates and will be subject to variation along with the fluctuation of the market.
Kimono in crisis?
The paradox of contemporary kimono culture

A morning in April

The house is beautiful. Certainly among the grandest I have seen in Japan.

Gotō-san is decked out immaculately in a kimono as she welcomes us on the doorstep, this time a subtle shade of sea green that suits her complexion. As always with Gotō-san, wearing a kimono looks effortless.

Gotō-san puts on a royal welcome. She conducts an impromptu tea ceremony, speaks knowledgeably of every plant and flower in the garden and shows us exquisite rooms in the house. For some time, she had promised to show me their house and old kimono shop in Gifu prefecture, but she is even more eager to do so as my mother is with me, visiting Japan.

I had first met Gotō-san some five months earlier in one of the second-hand kimono shops belonging to her family in the centre of Toyota city, where I lived for twelve months in 2015–2016. With many years of experience in kimono retail, at that time she was still working in the shop with her son. I quickly learned that the shop did more than sell second-hand kimono: it was also a source of advice on kimono cleaning, re-dyeing, re-stitching, outfit coordination, sewing, and many other things – in other words, the same services a regular kimono shop would provide. Most customers came specifically to seek her advice, or that of her son, who had spent many years working in a company in Kyoto specialising in dyed kimono. Their combined knowledge of the kimono was detailed and delivered with enthusiasm, something appreciated by their customers. As a result, a notice board on the wall announced the times she and her son would be in the shop, so people knew when to come to get the advice that they needed.

Her son, whom I met first, had allowed me to work in their shop once a week on Saturdays, where I helped with small tasks such as folding kimono and obi (sashes which are wrapped around the body), and interacting with customers. In the course of the three months or so that I spent there, I learned that the Gotō family had not always worked in the second-hand business – they had an established kimono shop that had been in the family for 120 years in the neighbouring prefecture of Gifu. The family head was Gotō-san’s husband, but at the time when I got to know the family, she and her son ran the business.
Kimono are most often bespoke. In a standard kimono shop, the customer usually first purchases a bolt of cloth, known as *tanmono* in Japanese, which is then tailored to fit the customer. Kimono shops – *gofukuya* – are more like cloth shops than clothes shops in that respect. Because bolts are constantly unravelled, held up against the customer for them to get a sense of what the flowing fabric would look like as a kimono, and then rolled up again, the skill to unravel and roll up a bolt quickly and efficiently is indispensable.

Gotō-san explains to my mother and myself that, for most of her working life, much of the purchase of stock with wholesalers and interaction with customers has been left to her, and indeed she appears every inch the queen of her domain in the family home.

‘I know everything,’ she says, and it doesn’t come off as boastful. ‘Every bolt of cloth, every taste or distaste that the client has. All the prices, all the colours, all the types. I know it all.’

She opens a large sliding door to reveal an in-built storage wall filled with bolts of kimono cloth. Her fingers hover for a moment before she chooses the one she wants to show us. She picks a fine-woven, yellow silk bolt. The pattern is simple and subtle, but the bolt itself is expensive. Many established regional weaving and dyeing techniques in Japan produce items that are relatively plain in appearance, but the complexity and time-consuming nature of their production push up the price.

Pieces made by craftspeople designated as *dentō kōgeishi* (‘masters of traditional craft’) by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry can cost several thousand pounds, although this varies widely. Formal kimono worn for ceremonial occasions, and statement pieces made using special regional craft, made the fortunes of kimono shops in the 1970s and 80s. But nowadays, these bolts are not sought after as avidly as they were.

Gotō-san smiles as she lays an obi sash across the kimono cloth to see the effect of colours and patterns combined. Pairing the right kimono with the right obi is one of the essential facets of kimono styling and wearing, and something that Gotō-san is skilled at. More than that, she enjoys it.

The shop itself is attached to the big, beautiful house, which is listed on the town’s webpage as a site of cultural interest. As with many kimono shops, fewer customers come through its doors these days.

‘We had three generations of customers, but it’s hard to sell now. Our customers tell us that they have too many kimono, that they are spilling out of their *tansu*! That’s why we started opening second-hand shops in 2008.’

The Gotō family had carefully nurtured their customers over the years, establishing relationships with local families that spanned generations. But the Gotō family were realists: they looked at the sharply declining kimono market and recognised that formal kimono with their expensive price tags were simply not selling as they used to. Gotō-san’s husband had a keen interest in economics, which he discussed with me on a couple of occasions over a coffee. Informed by their understanding of the broader economic context, the family
had sought alternatives that would utilise the family’s expertise, connections in the industry and the know-how built over the decades.

So the family opened four second-hand kimono shops, inviting locations peppered with friendly, hand-written notes (see Figure 1.1). But business has remained difficult, as it is for many kimono retailers: attracting and keeping customers is challenging, and with fewer people buying kimono in Japan the market continues to shrink. As with many shops that invite customers to browse, footfall may increase but while this may mean that people pop in to take a look, they do not necessarily buy anything.

In the years since 2016, the family has continued to show resilience in the face of difficulty. Even though the family head, Gotō-san’s husband, has sadly passed away and Gotō-san herself no longer comes to work in the second-hand shops, her son runs the business and his wife populates their new Instagram feed with outfits put together from items in the shops. The family faces the anxiety of belonging to an industry in crisis with quiet dignity. Their outlook is summed up in the words of the late Gotō senior, who once said to me with a wry smile: ‘We grit our teeth and carry on’.

**An afternoon in March**

It is unseasonably warm for March. The morning’s torrential rain would seem like a dream had it not left its signature humidity as proof of its passage through Aichi prefecture.